

Driven to Live a Healthier Lifestyle

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Sometimes a light just comes on that has the effect of turning things in a different direction. That is what happened to James Sallis. His passion as a young psychology graduate of Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi was studying what motivates people to exercise and adopt healthy activities. He soon discovered what many enthusiastic new college graduates experience; that the theories he learned in school about what compels adherence to regular exercise routines were ineffective.

This was the realization that turned on the light. His approach to exercise motivation changed as he went on to advanced studies at Tennessee's Memphis State University. Today, James Sallis is University of California at San Diego Distinguished Professor of Family and Preventive Medicine. He is internationally renowned for his profound insights about how community policies influence environments in ways that affect the levels of physical activity, nutrition, and obesity among residents.

A similar curiosity about community influences on healthy lifestyles excited our interest at Community Development Initiatives to team up this year with the San Angelo Metropolitan Planning Organization to conduct a Survey of Pedestrian and Bicycle Project Priorities. Interested San Angelo residents received invitations through a series of news stories and public notifications to participate in the Survey during the spring and early summer.

Six hundred and seventy-nine respondents from all parts of the city answered the 22-item questionnaire. The overwhelming majority (88%) expressed a sense of personal identification with walking, running, and cycling. Their levels of personal commitment, in combination with our comparison of the group with the known demographics of the city, indicate that the 679 respondents are a strong representative sample of local residents and households who champion pedestrian and bicycling activities.

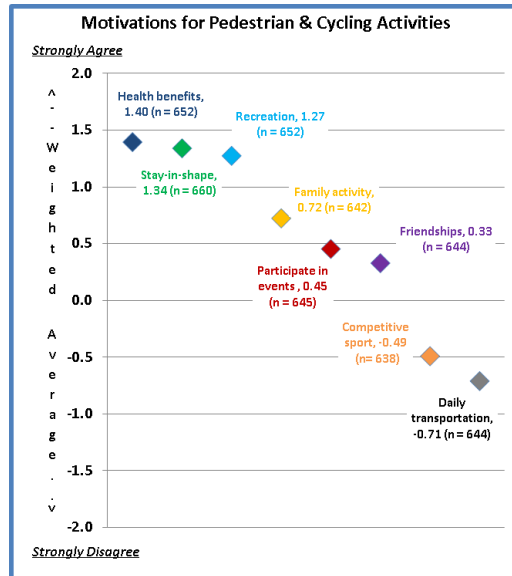
One of the key findings from the Survey concerns the question that captured the young psychologist's passion: what motivates people. The Survey asked respondents to rate each of eight different motivations on a scale ranging from positive two (+2) representing "Strongly Agree" to negative two (-2) representing "Strongly Disagree" responses.

The results show that healthy lifestyle orientations are powerful motivation for those local residents involved with walking, running, and cycling activities. The potential to reap health benefits, to stay-in-shape, and to engage in recreation were the three most strongly rated motivations. Still relevant, but rated at only moderate levels by respondents, were thoughts of being motivated by opportunities to share activities with family and friends, or to participate in community events or competitive sport.

Alongside the drive for healthy lifestyles is a sense of disappointment with the local history of planning and development for cycling and pedestrian infrastructure and facilities. For example, more than 60 percent of the Survey respondents disagreed (either somewhat or strongly) with the idea that the City does an excellent job of maintaining existing facilities. More than 70 percent disagreed that – except for major traffic arteries -- cyclists can safely ride on most city streets.

About 65 percent denied, in addition, that the City has addressed the pedestrian and cycling needs of all the neighborhoods and population groups in the community.

Motivations for Pedestrian & Cycling Activities



The Survey of Pedestrian and Bicycle Project Priorities demonstrate that San Angelo has a corps of champions for walking, running, and cycling activity. What the City lacks in their view is a continuous working policy committed to constant effort toward developing and creating the spaces for it.

In recent years, to be sure, positive additions developed by the City include the Texas Bank Sports Complex, improvements to neighborhood parks across the city, and sidewalk improvement projects in the Downtown and north-side areas to name a few. Additional progress is underway on a five-mile stretch of development for the Red Arroyo Hike and Bike Trail and for streetscaping plans to facilitate biking along the north Martin Luther King corridor. While the issue of walkers and joggers around Gun Club Road remains a thorny one, there is a new visionary plan out for redevelopment of parks and neighborhoods around Lake Nasworthy.

These steps overlap in some ways with the priorities of respondents to the Survey. The respondents threw strong support to developing cycling facilities around the Lake and along the complete length of Red Arroyo. They also gave priority to developing pedestrian facilities for walkable areas around the university, and in the Downtown zone. There are, however, key differences between the priorities of the Survey respondents and the progress of actual on-going projects.

For one thing, the most strongly supported project priority of all options presented in the Survey was to develop new or improved sidewalks and pedestrian facilities in all the city's school service areas. This garnered a high priority rating from 72 percent of respondents, and a like percentage strongly recommended that this cause should receive priority for use of public funding. Contrary to what one sometimes perceives, the core priorities of the city's champions for pedestrian and biking activity are not just athletes or those driven by athletic competition. As

noted, Survey respondents assigned only a modest degree of importance to opportunities for engaging in competitive sports as a motivating factor.

Another key difference between the priorities of Survey respondents and City's progress is the start/stop, on-again/off-again quality about actual projects. This quality stems from heavy reliance on funding from state or federal grants to realize action on the ground. By contrast, the local champions advocate a more constant City commitment.

For example, some 85 percent of Survey respondents agreed that the City should establish standards to provide for pedestrian and cycling infrastructure in all future development projects. More to the point, over 80 percent agreed that the City should commit an annual revenue amount to a dedicated capital fund for pedestrian and cycling infrastructure development.

All this leads to the exact quandary that changed the direction for James Sallis when the light came on. We might call it the Field of Dreams dilemma. Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella was inspired tremendously in the memorable 1989 movie when he heard the voice whispering, "If you build it, he will come."

Which comes first, an environment built to inspire healthy living or the motivated residents to use it? Is "build it so they will come" the best way to promote physical activity, or must building safe routes to schools, walkable areas, running paths, and bike trails wait on pent-up demand from highly motivated activity seekers?

Sallis' influential policy research says the choice between motivating a public and building a field of dreams is a false one. Instead, the key is to combine motivated champions of physical activity with a working community policy to build spaces that invite active healthy living habits. The benefits spread to elders, children, and other vulnerable populations at risk of sedentary lifestyles and chronic disease when that combination gains traction.

Policies of local communities must respond to many forces. There are powerful demands to keep taxes low, to create profitable business environs, to restrain and discipline public finances and limit spending. Beyond the economic and budget-driven aspects of policy, however, community policymakers must be mindful for the health and vitality of children, families, and the populace in general. That is what the local champions in the Survey of Pedestrian and Bicycle Project Priorities know.